

Tuesday, I did two uniquely Slovenian things, activities which are part of the warp and woof of the cultural tapestry here.

First, I watched Jože Gale's classic film, *Kekec*. *Kekec* is a Tom Sawyer-type character, who sets out on a journey, becomes entangled in an adventure, and then, through his pluck, guile and good nature, *Kekec* banishes a notorious bad man from his region.



The first thing that struck me while watching this film was I had no idea what period of time in which it was taking place. So, I asked my editor. "Jaka, what year does *Kekec* take place?" "Oh, anytime in the past millennium." He later back-pedalled and clarified, "OK, maybe from the Renaissance to the beginning of the 20th century."

To my eyes, *Kekec* seemed to travel a great distance at the beginning of the film. Later, I was summarily put back into perspective by some guys I was playing darts with. "*Kekec* on a journey?! He goes over a hill...maybe two hills. Maybe it's a journey to children." This cinematic illusion pleased me; it meant I fell into a world of wide-eyed, childlike wonder. Then I realized these "hills" were the same terrain mentioned in this issue: the mountainous area around Kranjska Gora.

Kekec also borrows from the conventions of the musical. *Kekec* has his own song, which he launches into with Orphean zeal. Everyone assures me all Slovenians learn this song in Kindergarten. The melody is infectious, almost to the point of annoyance.

But there was one line culled from the subtitles that stuck with me: "Whining ninnies, sour faces/Cannot keep me company." So, in addition to being completely full of ourselves, *Kekec* and I share a similar credo.

Which led me to my next act of Slovenian immersion, drinking *kuhano vino* from the stalls in the market square or Prešernov trg.

A few weeks ago, a writing colleague and I were sounding off on our various projects. She was writing about an open-air market in Brooklyn and encouraged me to do the same in Ljubljana. I wrote back, "Open-air market?! It's below freezing here. The only thing being sold at the open-air market is space at the open-air market. And it's going cheap."

Yet with the stroke of December 1st, the city made a liar out of me. Stalls line the Ljubljana. The market blasts turbo-folk and butane heat lamps. Where Pločnik stood in summer, two *kuhano vino* vendors currently reside. *Veseli December* has arrived.

Veseli is a hard-laboring word for all kinds of happiness, and finds itself in many applications. For example, *me veseli* means "Pleased to meet you."

I asked my editor (ever the stalwart guide in local matters) if Slovene had a distinction between "happy" and "merry." I explained happy means content, and merry means festive and ready to party. He responded, "Well, Slovenians are so rarely happy it all feels the same to us." Ah, stoic sarcasm. I can never pull it off, and I'm always charmed when others can.

So, in the company of my none-too-sour-faced, dart-throwing companions, we set off on the arduous, *Kekecesque* journey from Poljanska cesta to Prešernov trg. They assured me it was too late for *kuhano vino*, and the stalls would be closed. They also assured me it was too cold and Slovenians would be indoors now.

Four minutes later, we reached our destination. The stalls were indeed closed. A baker's dozen of stragglers stood about nursing their cups of mulled wine. Putting the press card into my cap, so to speak, I sauntered over to interview these remaining revelers.

"So, what's with this *kuhano vino*?" "Dunno, mate. We're all from England." Two other guys nodded.

Ljubljans, two. Journalistic instinct, zilch.

Luckily, there are many days left in December. I look with anticipation to covering this *kuhano vino* story in greater depth. And there are apparently two more *Kekec* films that may require screening. ■

